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PURDUE JOURNAL OF SERVICE-LEARNING AND INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Improving Mental Health of Elementary School Children

Alexa Proctor, College of Pharmacy

Abstract

Alexa Proctor is an advanced practice student on clinical rotations with the Purdue University College of Pharmacy. In this article, she describes her experience working with Mental Health America (MHA) of Tippecanoe County and third grade children, in addition to her passion to help improve mental health in students of all ages.

Student Introduction

I am a fourth-year pharmacy student at Purdue University in the College of Pharmacy. After completing pharmacy didactic core courses and observing a psychiatric clinical pharmacist practice, I became interested in the specialty area of psychiatric pharmacy, and took additional elective courses in that area. I wanted to learn more about the treatment and prevention of mental health disorders and what I could do to spread awareness about mental health in the community. After searching for volunteer opportunities on the United Way Volunteer Center website (United Way of Greater Lafayette, n.d.), I discovered many opportunities to get involved with Mental Health America (MHA) of Tippecanoe County. I was specifically interested in MHA's "I'm Thumbbody Special" program because I want to help educate children on mental health issues.

Community Partner Description

Mental Health America of Tippecanoe County, an affiliate of National Mental Health America, is a not-for-profit organization that provides a variety of

benefits to the general public, including mental health education, information, and supportive services. Specific programs and services MHA offers include brown bag forums, mental health first aid training, suicide prevention training, support groups, a crisis center hotline, rape survivor advocacy, mental health screenings, and supportive housing. The purpose of MHA is to improve the mental health of Americans, prevent public stigmatization of mental health disorders, and advocate for the rights, including effective and fair treatment, of those with mental health challenges. MHA of Tippecanoe County is located in downtown Lafayette, Indiana, and is available to serve the entire community (Mental Health America of Tippecanoe, n.d.).

Over 12 million Americans under the age of 18 will have a mental health disorder in a given year, with 50% of all lifetime mental health disorders beginning by age 14 (Mental Health America, n.d.a). The median age of onset for anxiety disorders is age 6, ADHD and behavior disorders age 11, and mood disorders age 13 (Mental Health America, n.d.a). MHA's "I'm Thumbbody Special" is an hour-long mental health education and self-identity program created to address this problem. It is offered to Tippecanoe County third grade teachers to have presented to their students. The mission of "I'm Thumbbody Special" is to demonstrate to children that they are as unique as their individual thumbprints. This program helps children value their own self-worth and have respect for others, since they are all special in their own way. The program also teaches students what mental health is and how it compares to physical health, the importance of self-identity, positive ways to express emotions, and to always respect themselves and others.

To operate successfully, the "I'm Thumbbody Special" program requires participation from local elementary

schools, in addition to volunteers. The organization is primarily funded by United Way, with the costs of the program factored into the annual budget. Each child is supplied with locally printed materials, including a poster, magnet, sticker, and booklet. The classroom also receives a large poster with the students' thumbprints and a Thumbbody pillow. These materials are assembled by volunteers, but the primary challenge of the program is finding enough volunteers. College students and retirees make up the majority of the volunteers due to their availability during elementary school hours.

Pharmacy students are specifically well-suited to meet the needs of this organization, as they learn about mental health disorders during coursework and encounter similar issues with patients while on internships and during experiential learning. Mental health disorders are on the rise, with more than one in five adults prescribed at least one medication to treat psychological and behavioral disorders. These include antidepressants, anxiolytics, antipsychotics, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) medications (Medco Health Solutions, 2011).

Activities and Impact

I applied to volunteer online and then interviewed with a volunteer coordinator. During the interview, they explained the volunteer opportunities available; I chose the "I'm Thumbbody Special" program. I received an e-mail with a list of schools, dates, and times available to volunteer. I selected third grade classrooms at both Woodland Elementary and Amelia Earhart Elementary schools. An MHA presenter and I led the class through a series of activities outlined in a workbook provided to each student, while the teacher observed. We began the presentation with an academic portion that defined physical and mental health. The children were then allowed to share when they felt different emotions, which further identified how each of them is different from the others. Next the children watched a video called, "No One Quite Like Me . . . Or You," which shows that our differences are what make each of us special. During the video, the children put their thumbprints on a bookmark to take home and on a large poster for the classroom. The presentation ended with a reading of Eric Carle's *The Mixed-Up Chameleon*, which teaches the children that being yourself is the best way to be. The children then shared something that makes them "thumbbody" special.

Interested volunteers can submit an application to MHA of Tippecanoe online. Other volunteer opportunities



"I'm Thumbbody Special" program booklet and sticker provided to the students.

within the organization include the Compeer Circle, Crisis Center Hotline, Joey Seaman Memorial Mental Health Library, and support groups.

Reflection and Conclusion

The "I'm Thumbbody Special" program was an avenue to help me increase awareness of the fact that you can be sick in a nonphysical way, and stress the importance of mental health to children in our community. Children need someone they can look up to who is trustworthy and encourages them to be their unique selves—someone who helps them build self-esteem. During my volunteer work with MHA, I felt I showed them that I truly cared about their well-being and was there to help them. This program allowed me to apply my curricular skills to a real-life setting and showed me how important it is to always be empathetic when interacting with patients, no matter their age. I believe students in health care fields would make great volunteers for this program, since empathy is such an important trait to exhibit as health care practitioners.

My involvement with MHA allowed me to see firsthand how common, but also how manageable, mental health conditions can be. Effective prevention, treatment, and management are possible, and we need to pay more attention to America's mental health, especially in our

youth. Mental health issues are on the rise, including on college campuses. College students are especially at risk for stress, anxiety, and depression, which could lead to other health issues, such as alcohol and/or substance abuse. It is important to understand the early signs, symptoms, causes, and proper management of mental health disorders in order to promote a good quality of life (Mental Health America, n.d.b). My experience with MHA is very applicable to my future pharmacy career, as I will be more mindful of the mental health of my patients, coworkers, and even myself.

... whether an illness affects your heart, your leg, or your brain, it's still an illness, and there should be no distinction.

—Michelle Obama

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